Brave New Leaders Guide Safe Berks into Future

The year 2020 has presented historic challenges and exciting internal changes to Safe Berks. Despite a global pandemic, Safe Berks continued to provide 24-hour free services to local survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Safe Berks emerged from the COVID-19 quarantine with two new leaders at the helm. Beth Garrigan was chosen to serve as the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO); and Mereliss Colon Ortiz was chosen as the new Chief Operating Officer (COO), both effective June 1.

“I am so proud of Safe Berks, and I am honored to be given the opportunity to lead and represent such an amazing organization of dedicated individuals who are saving lives, every day,” said Garrigan, who has been serving Safe Berks for the past two years as COO.

Prior to joining Safe Berks, Garrigan served the Children’s Home of Reading and the Department of Human Services.

Colon Ortiz said she is grateful to be chosen to serve as COO. She has served the organization since 2006, working all 14 years in the Safe House, providing shelter and services to survivors. Since 2017, she has served as Director of Residential Services.

“I am passionate about providing the best service to every client, so they will remember they were listened to, and treated with kindness and respect,” said Colon Ortiz. “I believe that people will always remember the way you made them feel.”

Both Garrigan and Colon Ortiz stressed that the services Safe Berks provides are more crucial now than ever.

“The social distancing and family isolation required to stop the spread of COVID-19 has increased danger to people trapped at home with abusers,” said Garrigan. “Home is not a safe place for everyone. We are very grateful for all the support we have received from the community during this difficult time, which has helped us tremendously in continuing to serve survivors.”

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See page 3: Safe Berks Staff Rise to Challenges of COVID-19.
A Message from our CEO

What a year of growth and change! We said goodbye to Mary Kay Bernosky after 15 years of dedicated service, welcomed our interim CEO Angel Helm for the first half of 2020 and filled our CEO, COO and Director of Residential Services roles with internal candidates. And we, much like similar organizations that serve survivors of domestic and sexual violence, faced many additional challenges, and needed to develop alternate methods of service delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But, thanks to the support and commitment from all our volunteers, donors, and community advocates, we never skipped a beat and were able to keep our services available 24/7.

In June of 2020, I began my new role as CEO of Safe Berks and am so proud to be leading this amazing team who exhibits such a passion for providing support and advocacy to survivors. Their drive to end domestic and sexual violence, their dedication to increasing awareness of oppression and their teamwork throughout these challenging times is truly phenomenal.

My current focus is to continue to support our staff in providing critical services to those in need during this health crisis. We are carefully monitoring CDC recommendations and updates, and we will continue to do everything possible to protect the health and safety of our survivors and staff.

I am excited to lead Safe Berks into our next chapter! I am looking forward to continuing our education and outreach so our community knows exactly who we are and what we do so there is never a question about who to call for support and safety, having our prevention programming become part of every school district’s curriculum, having every Berks County Police Department participate in the Lethality Assessment Program, and assuring that every patient, at every local medical facility is screened for domestic violence, sexual violence and human trafficking, at every visit.

Our future is bright! I look forward to our continued growth and building strong community partnerships so we can help survivors be heard, feel safe, and know that they are valued.

Respectfully,

Beth Gamian

Safe Berks Seeking Volunteer Cooks!

Safe Berks is seeking volunteers to prepare and deliver dinner to residents, every evening of the week. Another option is to sponsor dinner for Safe Berks residents from a local restaurant.

Thanks so much to all the volunteers and donors who have provided delicious dinners to Safe Berks residents since the COVID-19 health crisis began. No words can truly express our heartfelt gratitude for your kindness and generosity. Together, we are building a Safe Berks!

For more info, or to schedule a dinner, please contact Mindy McIntosh, Director of Development, at 610-468-9637 or MindyM@SafeBerks.org.

Safe Berks services are free, confidential, and available in English and Spanish.

Toll Free Hotline:
844-789-SAFE (7233) or Text SAFE BERKS to 20121
Available 24/7/365

Counseling
610-373-1206, ext. 606
Legal Services
610-373-1206, ext. 107
Peace@SafeBerks.org

www.SafeBerks.org
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Safe Berks Staff Rise to Challenges of COVID-19

Despite the uncertainties presented by a global pandemic, the Safe Berks staff has continued to provide expert, compassionate care to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault 24 hours every day during the COVID-19 health crisis.

While some staff worked from home during the shelter-in-place order, the Safe House staff and other employees reported to Safe Berks each day to serve our residents and ensure the building was clean and sanitized.

“In addition to providing shelter, food, therapy, case management and children’s activities, we continued to assist families in successfully moving out of the Safe House and into permanent, independent housing,” said Aleida Rodriguez, Director of Residential Services. “We stay calm and focus on our mission.”

The Safe Berks Counseling staff provided hundreds of counseling sessions to survivors, utilizing both tele-counseling and HIPAA-compliant videoconferencing.

“This is a challenging time for everyone, and it is additionally challenging to victims who are not emotionally or physically safe in their homes,” said Danielle Palermo, Director of Counseling. “We know that there is power and immense healing through talking and processing trauma, making counseling an essential resource for adult and child survivors during this trying time.”

During the quarantine, the Legal Services team responded to hundreds of calls from local survivors and provided ongoing legal assistance to dozens of survivors seeking representation at their final Protection From Abuse (PFA) hearings.

“We would like to encourage all survivors to continue to contact the Safe Berks Legal Department for assistance,” said Diane Ellis, Esq., Director of Legal Services. “We recognize that survivors may be isolated from their support systems now more than ever before, but we are still here to help. You are not alone.”

Safe Berks Medical Advocates continued to provide 24-hour support to survivors at hospitals and health centers throughout the health crisis. For victims trapped at home with an abuser, going to a hospital or healthcare office can be an opportunity to escape and ask for help.

As soon as social distancing guidelines were set in place, the Education and Outreach Department immediately began developing virtual presentations, and story times for children in English and Spanish, and sharing that content via social media.

More than 4,000 people viewed these creative educational materials, which aim to prevent domestic violence and sexual assault and promote healthy relationships. The Education staff also provided workshops via Zoom to help parents protect children from abuse.

Mindy McIntosh, Director of Development, said Safe Berks volunteers also rose to the challenge, preparing and delivering meals to residents, and donating food, toiletries, face masks, hand sanitizer, and other essentials.

“The support of the community has been really essential,” said McIntosh. “We have faced many challenges, but we know we don’t face these challenges alone.”

Safe Berks staff wear masks to reduce the risk of COVID-19, shown in photo from left, Aleida, Mereliss, Leida (top right), and Tara.
The Safe Berks Silent Witness Project is a visual monument to the Berks County women, men and children who were killed by domestic violence. Each red silhouette wears a shield that describes their tragic death.

In past years, the Silent Witness silhouettes were carried through the streets of Reading, a tradition focused on honoring and remembering these beloved victims. In addition to Safe Berks staff and volunteers, many family members and friends of the victims participated in these solemn marches. This Silent Witness Project always takes place in October, as part of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Due to the COVID-19 health issue, the 19th annual Safe Berks Silent Witness Project will take place virtually, through Safe Berks social media including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. Silent Witness posts honoring and remembering victims will be shared throughout the month of October. Look for a special presentation on Tues., Oct. 20, 2020. Check our social media and website for updated information.

Since Safe Berks began the Silent Witness Project in 1999, 69 Berks County residents have been killed by domestic violence, according to our records. In addition to honoring every victim of these tragedies, our goal is also to prevent future tragedies through education and awareness. While these victims can no longer speak to us, we still hear their voices. We hear their warnings, we amplify their pleas for justice, and we echo their urgent calls to action – to end this violence.

For more information about the Safe Berks Silent Project, please contact Lisa Tumbleson, Director of Education and Outreach, at LisaT@SafeBerks.org.

Congrats to New Leader of Residential Services!

On June 1, 2020, Aleida Rodriguez began serving in her new position as Director of Residential Services at Safe Berks. When Rodriguez joined the organization in 2008 as a Bilingual Legal Advocate, Safe Berks was known as Berks Women In Crisis or “BWIC,” and clients were sheltered in a secret location. Rodriguez has grown with the organization. From 2008 through 2017, she served survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault as a member of the Legal Department. Since 2017, she has served as the Assistant Director of Residential Services.

During her years of service as a Bilingual Legal Advocate, Rodriguez developed positive relationships with professionals in the courthouse, law enforcement, and other government and community agencies. When she transitioned to the Safe House in 2017, she brought her legal expertise and her network of community contacts to her work with residents and their Case Managers.

“I am honored to be chosen for this position,” said Rodriguez, who has also served 12 years in the Navy. “I am passionate about advocating for survivors, making sure they have a voice in our community, and that they are treated with compassion and respect.”

Safe Berks Silent Witness Project Honors Victims

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**Safe House Living Room Renovation**

Thanks to Angel Helm, Safe Berks Interim CEO for the first half of 2020, for sharing her leadership skills with Safe Berks, and for spearheading the renovation of the Safe House living room. This renovation includes new flooring, lighting, painting, curtains, and furniture. The new furniture was chosen to offer comfort, as well as durability. The new design creates a space that is beautiful and relaxing for residents of all ages.


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**Safe Berks & District Attorney’s Office Expand Partnership**

Safe Berks and the Berks County District Attorney’s Office have joined forces to create a County-wide Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). Formation of the Team was formally approved by District Attorney John Adams last year and is headed by Meghan Sager, the Safe Berks SART Coordinator. SARTs are multidisciplinary teams, comprised of individuals from the DA’s office, the County Rape Crisis Center, other members of law enforcement, and hospital personnel, particularly Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) nurses. The purpose of a SART is to provide a coordinated response to victims of sexual violence, in order to minimize trauma to the victims, while promoting improved investigation into and successful prosecution of sex crimes.

Core Team members of the SART team include Meg McCallum, Esq., Assistant District Attorney, Molly McDonough, Esq., Assistant District Attorney, John Solecki, Berks County STOP Detective, Amy Sundstrom, Berks County Victim/Witness Unit Supervisor, Cheryl Pentheny, Captain of Investigations from the Reading Police Department, Eleanor Delewski, SANE nurse from Tower Health/Reading Hospital, and Safe Berks staff Meghan Sager, Diane Ellis, Esq., Jennifer Sawyer, Macy Lengle-Lluberes, and Stacey Jordan. Safe Berks is excited about this new opportunity to partner with the DA’s office and other community stakeholders to improve our community’s response to sexual assault victims.
The vision of Safe Berks is: Berks County is free from domestic violence and sexual assault.

- Crisis Services
- Residential Services
- Education & Outreach
- Counseling
- Systems Advocacy
- Legal Services

Gifts to Safe Berks
The Give Now button, located on our website at www.safeberks.org/donate/donate-now/, is a convenient way to support Safe Berks. Receipts are generated immediately via email. The official registration and financial information of Safe Berks may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does imply endorsement.

Contact Us
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www.SafeBerks.org
P: 610.373.1206 | F: 610.372.4188
Email: Peace@SafeBerks.org

Toll Free Hotline:
844-789-SAFE (7233)
Dr Text SAFE BERKS to 20121

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Silent Witness Project
Virtual events through October
Including on Tuesday, October 20, 2020
DETAILS TO FOLLOW

Celebration of Peace
Monday, December 14, 2020
DoubleTree by Hilton, Reading
and a Virtual Component
DETAILS TO FOLLOW

All Event info correct as of printing date, please check www.SafeBerks.org and our Facebook page for updates.